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AUTHOR Seitz, James E.
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ABSTRACT

There is something unfortunate occurring in the discourse of writing instruction--something that requires scholars to present themselves as teachers who have found the answer and have students to prove it. Typically, the paper written by the composition scholar stakes a claim about the teaching of writing; compares that claim with others of related concern; and then substantiates the claim with examples of student work. The problem is that "student work" refers to a few examples from the best students in the class; the significant minority for whom the promoted method did not work are ignored. A more productive approach might use examples from student writing to interrogate the scholar's claims rather than to shore them up defensively. Instead of congratulating themselves by appropriating the prose of their best students, scholars need to look much more carefully at the work of those students their methods have failed--or, at the very least, those whose success is less certain. Take one example: out of 22 students taking a course in basic writing, about half earned a B- or better; about 27% of the class, however, seemed to pass through the semester in limbo. Though they seemed to have positive attitudes, they never illustrated anything resembling discernible improvement. The approach to writing instruction employed in this class--one that acclimates students to academic expectations by requiring them to write a range of discourses--did little to help this group of students. (TB)

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"A Different Exemplum: Those whom Good Teaching Fails"
James E. Seitz, University of Pittsburgh

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We're all aware of what might be called a standard formula for an essay in composition studies: you stake a claim about the teaching of writing; compare that claim with others of related concern; then substantiate the claim with examples of student work. "Student work," of course, can have a vast range of meanings: sometimes entire student papers are presented, and revisions as well; more often than not, brief excerpts--a paragraph, a few lines--are to suffice. In all cases those drawing on student work might justifiably contend that time or space restrictions prevent them from providing more extensive evidence. What editor or conference chair could possibly find room for the dozens (or hundreds) of pages of student writing that would be called for in a more serious attempt to "prove" the value and effect of a particular pedagogical approach? How many readers would want to devote themselves to reading reams of student writing from someone *else's* class in addition to their own? And in the face of all the reasons why a particular writer might "improve"--that is, if we can ever agree on what improvement in writing actually looks like--how could we be sure that a writer's transformation was a result of the instruction he or she received and not some other factor? As Stephen North has indicated, even those composition scholars who truly seek to make their work empirically verifiable have great difficulty producing what could be regarded as scientific knowledge about writing. It's no wonder essays that comment on the state of the field are always calling for "more research": so little is known about the relationship between various kinds of teaching and the results they produce.

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Not that any of this has dissuaded us from the practice of exemplifying our exemplary teaching with one or two exerpts of student writing. While I am not altogether antagonistic to this practice--and have, in fact, made use of it myself--I want to argue here that we should resist the temptation, as much as possible, to fall into what has become a disturbing disciplinary habit. I'm not even sure that "habit" quite captures the force of what we witness year after year in journals and at conferences: *obligation* may be more apt. We seem to feel obligated, pressured by the strong hand of precedent, to include these little scenes of student writing or student commentary in our articles and papers--as if the failure to cite them would leave us open to the same charge we level at our students: "Where are your *examples*?" Since we should supposedly offer some "support" for our claims about pedagogy, we find ourselves turning to the work of our students, presumably the benficiaries of all that good teaching. "Oh, yes, here's a remarkable portfolio that was written at the end of last term; a couple passages from this paper ought to make my point...."

I'm descending--or is it ascending?--into parody, I know; moreover, I'm refusing to provide any "examples" of the practice to which I refer. But I don't have to: I'm sure you've seen it as often as I have, maybe even *employed* it as often as I have, so there's no need to pick on anyone in particular. I'm not accusing certain individuals of being conceited about their teaching nor of being irresponsible in their writing. What I'm saying is that there's something unfortunate occurring in the discourse of writing instruction--something that requires us to present ourselves as teachers who have found the answer and have students to prove it. This, I believe, is one of the reasons why many in the field found Jane Tompkins' *College English* piece of a few years ago so refreshing: here was a well-known scholar who--in the first half of her article, at least--admits that she has often felt lost in the classroom, that she was for years

insecure and confused as to how she might most effectively reach her students. Now you go on to read the second half of that article and you might find yourself nauseated by its New Age rhetoric and its ignorance of prior discussions of teacher authority--but there's no denying that, despite where she ends up, Tompkins manages at the beginning of her essay to share her uncertainty as a teacher in ways that challenge conventional reports of teaching and learning.

But I want to be clear about something at this juncture: by no means am I suggesting that we turn to the kind of confessional discourse that Tompkins, Nancy Sommers, and others have brought to composition journals over the last few years. This type of writing often revels in personal "examples" and epiphanies even more than the work I've been criticizing, sometimes to the extent that all those tender scenes of instruction we are asked to witness don't even seem to be pointing to anything beyond themselves. No, my suggestion is not that we provide more examples but that we provide a different kind of example altogether--one that does not necessarily "support" the claims we wish to make about teaching.

I realize that this may sound strange or even illogical. Isn't the whole point of an example to *support* a particular line of thought? Yes, I would say, that is certainly what is intended when examples are brought forward--"mobilized," to use the common military metaphor. But the wonderful thing about examples, as with all acts of language, is that they generate much more than their makers intend. While *writers* see the example as that which reinforces their argument, *readers* can--and often do--use the example as an opportunity to question the validity of that argument. Reading, we see flaws in the example, we wonder what it omits, we reinterpret it so that it says something else, something the writer has overlooked. What might at first seem a "strong" example becomes "weakened" by those who object to it, those who refuse to read it as the writer

desires. We shouldn't be surprised, in other words, when our pleas for students to "provide examples" lead to papers in which old gaps have been filled with "support" that only serves to open new holes, new troubles.

It might be possible, then, for those of us concerned with the teaching of writing to use examples in the way that good readers do--as places to interrogate our claims rather than to defensively shore them up. Instead of congratulating ourselves by always appropriating the prose of our best students, we need to look much more carefully at the work of those students our methods have failed--or, at the very least, those whose success is less certain. It's as if we imagine that to share such work would be to expose ourselves as poor teachers--when, in fact, we surely know that *all* teachers, no matter how impressive, have students for whom their pedagogical approach has little or no effect. Even Mina Shaughnessy, in whose name the MLA grants its annual award for excellence in research on teaching, admits in *Errors and Expectations* that 14% of a sample of students in her program at City College improved only slightly and that 8% improved not at all. Another 22% improved only in what Shaughnessy calls "one area" of their writing--thus leaving just 56% whom she can say demonstrated signifcant or marked improvement. Unfortunately, when in the same chapter she provides several examples of student prose written at the beginning and at the end of the smester, all reflect students who have made recognizable, even dramatic, progress. I find myself wondering about the work of those students in the bottom 44% who never really caught on: what did *their* writing look like at the end of the term? How would we describe the changes evident in their writing, even if we would not call them "improvements"? How are we to account for those students who *do* make a solid effort yet seem to be stuck in the production of mediocre prose even when they receive good teaching?

Last semester I taught a course in basic writing to 22 students. Exactly half of these students, the top eleven, did well enough to make a "B-" or above for their final grade. Two of these students did magnificent work right from the beginning, and probably didn't belong in basic writing in the first place; I could hardly claim credit for their performance. Nine represent what most teachers would see as success stories: they worked hard, made decided progress in any number of respects, and finished the course well-prepared for their next writing class. If I had the time, I'd provide a few "examples" of their response to my brilliant pedagogical methods . . . .

But what about the other side of the tracks, the other eleven students? Two were savvy enough to get by without much effort; they wanted simply to take their "C" and run, and they figured a way to do so with minimal effort. Three students failed--one student because she was too far behind everyone else from the beginning and could not hope to catch up in fifteen weeks, and two students whose personal lives prevented them from coming to class after midterm. That leaves six students--roughly 27% of the class--who seemed to me to pass through the entire semester in a kind of limbo as writers. Their work was flat, bland, plodding, and terribly boring to read. Sometimes I found myself pushing their papers to the bottom of the pile in order to delay the discomfort that was sure to come. Interestingly, the trouble appeared to have nothing to do with these students' lack of commitment to their education: they attended class, appeared to follow if not always participate in discussion, and attempted to revise their papers according to my suggestions on early drafts. But they never, to my mind, illustrated anything resembling discernible improvement; their final portfolios were as drab and lifeless as their first piece of writing at the beginning of the term. The fact that they ultimately passed my course with a "C" or a "C-" says less about their achievement than about an institutional reality: at the

university where I teach--as, I suspect, at most universities--we tend to pass students on to the next level of writing instruction unless they display difficulties so severe that we cannot possibly argue for their being moved along the assembly line that large composition programs almost invariably become.

I'm assuming that most, if not all, teachers of writing have had experience with students of the sort I'm describing--if only because I've encountered a group of them in *every* composition course I've ever taught. These students are the question marks for me, and I want to contend that they should find a more prominent place in our professional discourse. They represent not those who "fail," but those whom *we* seem to fail by not providing a response to their work that would enable them to reinvent their relationship with written language. I realize that the kind of reinvention I'm hoping for is a grand task that we should not expect to complete in one semester; but I do believe it can be *begun* in one semester, and I feel fairly certain that it did *not* begin for those six students in my class last term. I'm not saying this to beat myself up in public; rather, I'm trying to understand how we might best represent pedagogies that have a good deal of success--recall my nine students whose work improved significantly--but that simultaneously fail to reach a substantial minority of the class. Were I to pretend, by providing only "shining" examples of student writing, that my approach to basic writing last term was unproblematic, I would be ignoring the complexity and heterogeneity of my students' reactions to my teaching. Yet this is just what seems to occur in the process of exemplification as it is found in numerous books and articles.

Okay--I give in--I'm finally going to present an *example* of the alternative we might pursue. Let's say that I were writing an essay promoting the value of asking students to write in a number of discourses during the course of a semester. What students need--I can see myself contending--is not just

academic discourse but discourses that *compete* with academic discourse and thereby help to illustrate its characteristic procedures, conventions, and assumptions. In order to recognize what academic discourse *is*, students need to recognize what it is *not*. I might go on to advise that we ask students to write essays, by all means--but in addition to make sure that they write letters and teleplays and journalistic reports and poetry and anything else that highlights the differences between various discourses. They have to get a sense of *rhetoric*, of social *function*, I would argue, before they can effectively work with and within something like academic prose.

As it happens, I *have* made this argument on several previous occasions, and my basic writing class last term was structured by just such a conception of writing instruction. Students were given the opportunity to write and revise in a number of genres, culminating in a portfolio that included a sample of each of the various discursive forms--of which academic writing was only one--they had attempted during the term. Now, it would be fairly easy for me to make a case for this approach in a journal article or conference paper were I to take samples from the nine students whose portfolios revealed a wonderful awareness of and attentiveness to language that appeared absent in their work during the early weeks. I might even draw on the work of those two students whose portfolios were truly innovative, well beyond that of their classmates--though, as I said earlier, their writing was of this quality from the beginning of the course. Who, after all, would know any better? Who would know about the other students? Aren't we all expected to have students who are, to use the ubiquitous term, "resistant"?

But if we're really interested in exploring resistance, then we better look not only at the kind of resistance good teaching overcomes but also at the kind of resistance that doesn't seem to go away. Not just the resistance we

romanticize in visions of The Evil Capitalist Society vs. The Poor Helpless Student--but the unglamorous resistance of students who aren't even trying to resist anything. These are people who *want* to learn, who earnestly--too earnestly, perhaps--"apply themselves" to the task. Yet the same teaching methods that energize others in the class fail to bring them any spark. Looking through my copies of portfolios from last term, I come again to Traci, a student whose revisions succeeded in somehow incorporating all my comments had suggested without it making the slightest difference in the quality of her papers. There almost seems to be a *talent* that some students have in accomplishing this feat! Furthermore, the computer seemed to be working *against* Traci rather than for her, for it allowed her to make little additions and deletions that didn't really change much in the original draft--though from her point of view, she had done a lot of thoughtful rewriting, carefully considering both my marginal notes and extensive commentary. In an attempt to get around this problem, I required that at least one paper be a *complete* revision, with nothing, not a single line, retained from the first draft. For many in the class this worked brilliantly; for Traci, despite her diligence, it only managed to produce still another meandering paper, no better or worse than her previous attempt.

My contention, then, is that my imaginary essay on using multiple discourses in the basic writing class needs to do more than simply "support" its views with examples of my best students writing. A responsible discussion of my pedagogy would also have to include counter-examples from the work of students like Traci, who throw a wrench into the well-oiled machine we often wish our classes could be. After ten years of teaching composition, I really don't know what would have helped Traci and the five others in that class I've grouped with her to begin to transform their writing. Nor have I ever read an article or heard a paper that has much to say about students in the middle, about those

who "get by" without any apparent enlightenment or pleasure. Composition seems as bored with these students as they are with composition, and the practice of exemplifying the work of either one's best or one's worst students consigns this group of middling achievers to files we'd rather forget. We don't know what to do with them during the term, and we don't know what to do with them after it's over--other than send them along to the next course.

What we *should* know is that glib notions of "encountering multiple discourses" or "entering the academic discourse community" aren't good enough. For every student that we can bring forth to exemplify the benefits of our progressive pedagogies, there is a student who belies the seamlessness of our narratives of teaching. We need to see to it that these "other" students become part of our conversation, a part of the examples we cite when we represent our classrooms--so that they can begin to speak to us, and we can begin to learn to speak to them.